

Sierra Club opposes state road tax

[BY HOWARD FISHER, CAPITOL MEDIA SERVICES](#)

June 15, 2008 - 7:38PM

Arizona voters should defeat a proposed 1-cent hike in state sales taxes because it doesn't devote enough to mass transit, the Sierra Club is urging.

The environmental group complained Thursday that only 18 percent of the \$42.6 billion that would be raised during the next 30 years from the new levy would go to things like more buses and light rail.

Jim Vaaler, who chairs the organization's Grand Canyon chapter, said the club is particularly interested in the proposed Tucson-to-Phoenix passenger rail service.

Thursday's announcement creates a second front of opposition for the business and civic groups that hope to convince voters to increase the amount of taxes they pay on most items they purchase.

The Arizona Federation of Taxpayers is complaining that the plan actually spends too much on what chairman Tom Jenney calls "highly expensive and ineffective transit projects such as light rail."

Rep. Russell Pearce, R-Mesa, is exploring whether to put an alternate plan on the November ballot, one that would hike the state's 5.6 percent sale tax by just half a cent, with all of the money going to new and expanded freeways and roads.

Roc Arnett, president of the East Valley Partnership, a key backer of the 1-cent hike, said Thursday he could not comment specifically on the Sierra Club's concerns. But Arnett said he believes foes are in the minority.

Arnett said he went to a public hearing on the plan Wednesday night in Phoenix. "There were very few people that were against it," with most believing that a major investment in all transit improvements is necessary to relieve congestion.

Vaaler said 55 percent of the cash raised would go to state highways, mostly in Maricopa and Pima counties. He said that makes little sense, given that both counties already levy their own sales taxes for transportation, with most of those dollars also earmarked for roads.

He noted that none of the proceeds from Arizona's 18-cent-a-gallon gasoline tax goes to mass transit projects.

Vaaler said there needs to be "a more balanced transportation system."

The Sierra Club was particularly upset that the tentative plan the tax would fund includes new roads in the area from Chino Valley through Prescott Valley to Dewey.

"This will not only subsidize more sprawl in an area already fighting over diminishing groundwater, but will also fragment one of the last, best pronghorn grasslands," said Tom Slaback who chairs the club's Prescott-area group.